



NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION®

People and Nature: Our Future Is in the Balance

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**Testimony of the National Wildlife Federation on
Conservation Strategies for Greater Sage-grouse
Before the Subcommittee on Fish, Wildlife and Water of the
Senate Environment and Public Works Committee
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I am Ben Deeble, Sage-grouse Project Coordinator of the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), the nation's largest conservation education and advocacy organization. Our members are America's mainstream conservation advocates who share a commitment to instituting common sense conservation of wildlife throughout this great continent.

For more than five years, the National Wildlife Federation has been involved in the development of monitoring and conservation efforts for greater sage-grouse in the western states, coordinated from our Northern Rockies Natural Resource Center in Missoula, Montana, and through our affiliate organizations in Wyoming and Nevada. During this time we have been deeply engaged in developing state conservation plans for the bird, involved in public education about the conservation challenge presented here, and facilitated the exchange of information about both the ecology and management imperatives for this extraordinary species between agencies, other conservationists, and the general public. We have organized conferences on sage-grouse conservation and on broader topics related to wildlife and energy development.

Fortunately, there have been decades of research on the life-cycle of sage-grouse, so there is ample information on the needs of the species. High quality research of scientists working under the umbrella

of the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) and several academic institutions has combined historic population data with cutting-edge habitat and genetic analysis to synthesize a very solid understanding of this bird and its habitats. Much of the full management picture can be completed with information from the disciplines of range science and restoration ecology. While there are still some unanswered questions about sage-grouse, I am confident in asserting that we know as much about this species' life cycle, habitat needs, behavior, and ecology as any bird in the nation, and using both proven methods and strong inference, we can implement effective conservation actions. Using this broad scientific basis, it is my sense that there is a potential currently for productive and meaningful deliberations among agencies and other partners for implementing effective management actions, for designing and funding these efforts in specific geographic areas, and for verifying our results.

And it will be a huge task. In my mind, what complicates the management of sage-grouse is two-fold. Foremost is that many different factors can affect the habitat quality of the bird, from outright conversion of their habitats for things like intensive crop production, to much more subtle factors like weed and evergreen tree invasion. Roads and their vehicle traffic, utility lines, fences, pesticides, weeds, wildfire, new predator populations, pond building, urbanization, extreme weather, over-grazing, over-hunting – all have been shown to have implications for sage-grouse reproduction and adult survival. The second complicating factor is that sage-grouse, even where thriving, exist in relatively low densities and move around a lot. Individuals within populations can be highly mobile, in some cases regularly migrating 80 miles or more in multiple directions, with sustainable populations occupying areas that ultimately comprise huge landscapes. Yet the birds are, to some extent, specialized, using relatively specific parts of these large landscapes, parts which must remain in high quality and interconnected by hospitable corridors. Both sets of characteristics make populations particularly vulnerable to habitat fragmentation and degradation. In addition, while any one of the above factors alone may not be devastating to grouse populations, in many places multiple factors likely work synergistically to both suppress reproductive success and elevate adult mortality, resulting in population declines and eventual extirpation. These several factors also occur across multiple jurisdictions of federal, state, and private lands, making coherent management for the bird bureaucratically, socially, and economically complex. There are many examples where bureaucracies are working at cross-purposes within agencies, and many instances where private interests are doing the same.

Some populations remain robust, but many are clearly in an ongoing downward trend towards local and regional extinction. Greater sage-grouse populations and reproductive rates have been declining in the West for at least the last four decades. Population declines are estimated rangewide to average approximately 33%, while productivity has declined an average of 25% (Connelly and Braun 1997). These declines are the result of a variety of causes, with degradation and destruction of shrub-steppe habitats being dominant factors (Wambolt et al. 2002). Unprecedented new activities in these landscapes also have the potential to speed regional extinctions, and new disease issues are emerging. Essentially sage-grouse are a bird of the wildest sagelands we have left in the West, as evidenced by the fact that we have already lost populations from at least one-third of their historic range West-wide. All populations throughout the species' range have now been petitioned for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) (WDFW 2000, Webb 2002).

That said, let me be emphatically clear. To the degree that a stereotype is being created in some places that the conservation community wants to "shut down" livestock or energy production in the West using the sage-grouse, that stereotype is false. We believe that in some locations well-managed livestock grazing is compatible with healthy sage-grouse populations and, in fact, may work to maintain important blocks of sagebrush grassland habitat. Likewise, there are core guidelines on important practices related to minimizing and mitigating the effects of energy production. All types of energy production will not be compatible in all places with sage-grouse, but both onsite practices and offsite mitigation hold promise for maintaining critical habitat and core populations of sage-grouse. Using the good science that already exists for the management of the bird and its habitats, whether in the context of energy development, livestock grazing, or any of several other human activities, we can maintain this important shrub-steppe ecosystem for a variety of wildlife species and human uses.

Adopt-A-Lek: Population Monitoring

As one step in rising to this conservation challenge, the National Wildlife Federation in late 1999 launched in Montana what for us is a relatively unusual field project named "Adopt-A-Lek." Starting with just a handful of volunteers, largely sage-grouse hunters, we began training and fielding people to count sage-grouse at dawn each April on their breeding leks. Most state agencies generally did not, and still do not, have the capacity to get multiple annual counts of a majority of their leks, and we felt we

could recruit and train a highly-motivated and competent labor force to seasonally assist with population data collection. Using accepted state survey protocols, our volunteers have proven to be reliable, competent, and an asset to regional survey efforts. We provided seed money for our affiliates in Wyoming and Nevada to launch their own state-based Adopt-A-Lek programs in 2001. The project has grown dramatically through support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, state agencies, private foundations, the U.S. Forest Service, and we hope in 2005, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). To give you a sense of scale, last April ninety-three volunteers drove over 35,000 miles in Montana, Wyoming, and Nevada to monitor more than 150 leks, in many cases getting multiple counts. This constitutes somewhere between 5-10% of the total greater sage-grouse survey effort West-wide.

In addition to helping collect the on-the-ground data that is critical to sage-grouse conservation efforts, we believe that recruiting local people for population monitoring is perhaps the best way to help educate and inform them about the landscape and habitats the birds survive in, and bring their experience up to levels where they can help develop and fully participate in further conservation efforts. While NWF has been very successful to-date fielding volunteers to census sage-grouse, and the project has proven relatively economical compared to similar agency-based efforts, it is likely that a substantial shift in geographic scope or census intensity would require new multi-year funding mechanisms.

Habitat Enhancement Incentives to Private Landowners

The second leg in our program involves delivering incentives to landowners to implement sage-grouse habitat enhancement measures. A primary objective of this project is to explore economically acceptable methods for enhancing sage-grouse habitats in working landscapes, such as voluntary incentives for altering grazing patterns, as well as restoring rangeland and habitat productivity through other techniques. An additional objective of this proposal is to conduct habitat management experiments to test if attaining WAFWA's recommended guidelines for nesting and early brood-rearing habitats in the vicinity of leks will increase the local grouse population. The new plan for sage-grouse conservation in Montana and several other states identifies grazing management as one of the available tools for enhancing grouse habitats (MDFWP 2002). Elsewhere, both positive and negative impacts to sage-grouse habitat from livestock grazing have been documented (Beck and Mitchell 2000). A field tour of the majority of lek sites throughout southwest Montana in April 2003 identified a lack of herbaceous

cover in otherwise relatively large expanses of sagebrush as potentially the limiting factor for sage-grouse productivity and populations in the region (Braun 2003). The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation has offered NWF a challenge grant to begin incentive delivery to private landowners in 2005 who volunteer to participate in habitat management actions related to livestock grazing. Financial support for landowners engaged in management experiments involving reduced springtime grazing of grouse habitats is essential because of the particularly significant economic impacts incurred by loss of forage during this time of year (Torell et al. 2002). Private lands with existing suitable sagebrush canopy will be prioritized for breeding habitat enhancement. However, because of mixed land ownership patterns and public lands grazing leases, enhancement sites could be a combination of suitable private and public lands anywhere within lek specified buffers, if we can get through the red tape. Landowners will use financial incentives for the specific objective of meeting their own herd forage needs while managing lands to achieve the recommended guidelines for sage-grouse breeding habitat. Recommended breeding habitat conditions will be achieved on the maximum number of acres possible within buffers using the available incentives. Incentive levels will be market-based, designed to be essentially economically neutral for the landowners that enact the habitat prescriptions. Management prescriptions will be developed and implemented with the objectives of increasing herbaceous (grass and forb) vegetation within sagebrush stands of >15% canopy from May 15-July 1 for multiple years.

In addition to financial incentives, some landowners have requested legal protections from potential liability, such as through inclusion under a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurance (CCAA), should sage-grouse be listed under the ESA while the species is being conserved on their property. A CCAA will be developed for use in Montana, and we anticipate some additional states will be able to offer Certificates of Inclusion to private landowners by 2005.

Current Agency Actions, Greater Sage-Grouse and the ESA

The third leg of our conservation effort involves somewhat more direct engagement with public land management agencies. There are many opportunities in agency actions to adopt improved and proven habitat management practices for sage-grouse conservation. While some local jurisdictions have made great strides, adoption of proven beneficial practices have been, in many places, uneven at best. Guidance from agency leadership has been slow in being issued, and agency implementation at the field

level has suffered from inadequate information, staff, funding, conflicting priorities, economic concerns, and business-as-usual inertia. As a result, NWF has found itself in the unfortunate situation of challenging through the courts and administratively some agency actions in efforts to gain management improvements for sage-grouse habitat. NWF has been conducting all its efforts in a regulatory environment that lacks federal recognition of greater sage-grouse as threatened or endangered, and progress in the proliferation of state-level planning and research efforts during this period has been significant. The question yet unanswered is whether the current momentum to sustain greater sage-grouse populations and habitats, particularly the expensive and time-consuming task of delivering conservation on-the-ground, will continue without the threat of further listing action.

Actions to conserve a closely related species, the Gunnison sage-grouse in southern Colorado and Utah, have come almost too late, with only a few thousand birds known to remain in some dozen small isolated populations. This species most certainly requires upgrading in its designation and more stringent protections under the ESA. Recovery, if possible, will require a much more intensive effort relative to the land area involved.

Regarding the petition pending to list greater sage-grouse as federally threatened or endangered rangewide, here, too, we support the professional wildlife biologists making their best evaluation of the species' status, without political interference. There are new factors emerging, like vulnerability of the species to West Nile virus, that complicate the already complex task of evaluating the species across eleven states, and the Service should be given every resource it needs to competently complete this status determination.

Lesser classifications by agencies have both assisted agency progress towards developing and implementing conservation actions, and have been underutilized for grouse conservation. The Forest Service considers sage-grouse a "sensitive" species rangewide and uses the bird as a "management indicator" species in several forests and grasslands, which has greatly aided conservation planning. In our opinion, the loss of this latter management designation under newly adopted planning regulations will be an unfortunate step backwards for sage-grouse conservation on Department of Agriculture lands. State Fish and Game agencies still manage sage-grouse as a huntable species in many areas, and are doing their best to responsibly manage seasons and bags to allow some pursuit of a harvestable surplus

of sage-grouse where healthy populations are still found. In our view this is reasonable, professional wildlife management, and seasons should be managed based on science, not political considerations. In some places the science suggests the season should be closed. The BLM gives sage-grouse special status classification through their planning process, but in very few instances has taken substantive action to do new on-the-ground special management for the bird. For example, despite a decade-old agency directive to designate Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) for sage-grouse, none have been implemented. As recently as last year, BLM field offices in Montana were denying nominations of priority sage-grouse habitats as ACECs, using the rationale that sage-grouse did not meet the “importance” criterion that would trigger full nomination review. As another example, withdrawal of leasable and locatable minerals, has yet to occur anywhere specifically to conserve sage-grouse.

Conclusion

The unfortunate situation today is that we cannot point to a single place where a large sage-grouse population is clearly secure for the long-term. Sage-grouse do not have a single place that is not vulnerable to weed invasion or wildfire, open to potential energy development or over-grazing, slated for agricultural conversion or subdivision, and certainly no place that is shielded from the potential impacts of disease. We need to take action to buffer the populations in several places against both catastrophic and chronic events by restoring the productivity and security of this species and its habitat. Many mechanisms already exist and are being proposed for conserving the large landscapes the birds need, through easements and special management designations. Many talented people are already on the ground doing potentially helpful work. What is lacking is the precedent for enough diverse partners to work together to focus and fund the tasks at hand, then get them done.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before your committee,

Ben Deeble, Sage-grouse Project Coordinator